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ABSTRACT

On the premise that considering children's point of view when examining the relationship between work and family can provide crucial information for many fields, this study examined the nature and quality of living conditions and the competence of 9- to 12-year-olds. Participating in the questionnaire study was a representative random sample of 840 students, a subgroup from a sample survey of 6- to 12-year-olds from 68 primary schools in Belgium. For 546 of these children, the parents also completed questionnaires. About 95 percent of children lived in 2-parent families. In 67 percent of the families both parents were gainfully employed; in 23 percent only the father was employed. The findings indicated that approximately 80 percent of children were satisfied with their mothers' employment situation, 75 percent with their fathers' situation and 60 percent with both parents' situation. The child's gender had no influence on satisfaction with parents' employment situation. Parents underestimated the number of dissatisfied children by 5 to 10 percent. The prevailing reasons for children's satisfaction with regard to parents' employment were that the parent could earn money, that they are sufficiently at the child's disposal, and that the parents enjoyed their occupation. Children whose mothers were not employed were especially satisfied because their mothers were very often at home and could look after them. Children of employed parents especially wanted to see their parents more at home or remaining at home, and having more time. (KB)

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The quality of life of children: The combination of gainful employment and family through the eyes of children

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Abstract

It is commonpractice to examine the problem of the combination of employment and family from the viewpoint of adults. Considering the few exceptions we think that the point of view of the child constitutes equally important and in some fields even crucial information for this kind of research. Children are not only direct observers but are also involved in the daily coping of their parents with work-role conflicts. The data on which we report are part of a large-scale investigation into the nature and quality of the living conditions and competence of 6 to 12 year old children. In 68 primary schools -a representative random sample of the primary schools of the Flemisch Community and the Brussels-Capital Region in Belgium- all pupils of one level whose parents consented (n= 1798/2141), completed a questionnaire on different aspects of their lives (family, parents' employment, school, environment, friends and leisure).

The 9- to-12-year old children (n = 840) rated their satisfaction with their fathers' and mothers' employment situation. We also analysed the answers to the open questions regarding their prevailing reasons for satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Gender differences and differences between children of two-parent families where both parents are gainfully employed or only the father is gainfully employed are also analysed.

The quality of life of children: The combination of gainful employment and family through the eyes of children

Introduction

It is of course common practice to examine the issue of the combination of employment and family from the viewpoint of adults (Barnett et al., 1994). We think that the point of view of the child can also constitute important and, in some fields, even crucial information for this kind of research. Children are both, parties directly concerned and direct witnesses of the way in which parents every day try to combine gainful employment and household duties.

Wilk and Bacher (1994) conducted a large survey of living conditions amongst 11-year-old children in Austria. They are among the first researchers who included children as subjects of investigation in a large scale survey. They questioned children on, inter alia, their satisfaction with the working situation of their mothers and compared their answers with assessments of this satisfaction made by the latter. We attempt to replicate this part of the 1994 study by Wilk and Bacher and we extend it by also questioning on the satisfaction with the working situation of the fathers, by including the children's reasons for dissatisfaction and their wishes for change.

The data reported form part of a large-scale CBGS-survey (Van den Bergh, 1994, 1995) of the (quality of the) living conditions and the competence of 6- to -12-year-old children. The survey was conducted in co-operation with the Developmental Psychology Centre of the Catholic University of Louvain (Professor A. Marcoen) and connects with the survey of living conditions by Peeters and Woldringh (1993) in the Netherlands.

Method

Sample

840 children, from 9 to 12 years old participated. This is a subgroup from a sample survey amongst 1798 6- to -12-year-old children (representative of the population of primary schools in the Flemish

Community) on which a study of the quality of the living conditions and the competence of the children has been made. For 546 of these children the parents also completed questionnaires.

95,4% of the children lived in a two-parent family: in 67% of the families both parents were gain fully employed, in 23% only the father was gainfully employed, in 2.4% only the mother was gainfully employed, in 3% none of the parents were gainfully employed.

4,6 % of the children lived in a one-parent family: in .3% with their fathers, all of whom were gainfully employed, in 2.3% with their gainfully employed mothers, in 2% with their not gainfully employed mothers.

Research questions

1. What is the percentage of children who are satisfied with their fathers' and mothers' (employment) situation and what percentage of them would rather see it changed?
2. What is the degree of satisfaction with their fathers' and mothers' (employment) situation?
3. Are parents able to assess well their children's satisfaction with their mothers' and fathers' (employment) situation?
4. Which are the prevailing reasons for the children's satisfaction with their fathers' and mothers' (employment) situation?

   What would children most like to see changed?

In the previous questions, are there any differences between:

a. children of two-parent families where both parents are gainfully employed and children of two-parent families where only the father is gainfully employed?
b. boys and girls?

Procedure

In December 1994 all pupils of one level in 68 participating schools were questioned all together in their classrooms. For that purpose two questionnaires were drawn up, one for the 6- to -8-year-old (n=958) and one for the 9- to -12-year-old (n=840). Besides, use was made of a Dutch version

(Veerman et al., in press) of a standardised perceived competence scale (Harter, 1985). For the use among the youngest children this scale was shortened and simplified. We thus gathered questionnaire information on the living conditions of 1240 parents from the sample survey. For approx. 90% of the pupils data from their teachers are available as well, among which a translated and adjusted version of the perceived competence scale used.

For this part of the study the questions on the satisfaction with the fathers' and mothers' (employment) situation, questionned by means of a four-point-scale, are analysed. Open questions sound: (1) the reasons of satisfaction and/or dissatisfaction with the fathers' and/or mothers' (employment) situation; (2) the possible wishes for change in the fathers' and/or mothers' (employment) situation. In order to analyse the data use was made of t-tests and analyses of variance.

Results

Question 1. Percentage of children who were satisfied with their parents' (employment) situation and percentage who would like to see it changed.

In the total group, the percentage of the children who were satisfied with their mothers' (employment) (see table 1) situation is significantly higher ($p < .001$) than the percentage of those who were satisfied with their fathers' (employment) situation resp. 83% and 76%, $t(545) = 3.25$; $p < .001$, paired t-test). The percentage wanting a change in the fathers' situation is considerably higher than the percentage wanting a change in the mothers' situation (resp. 27% and 20%, $t(545) = -3.37$; $p < .005$, paired t-test). These differences are also substantial in the families where only the father is in gainful employment ($t(80) = 2.48$; $p = .015$) but not in the families where both parents are gainfully employed.

Only 63% of the children were satisfied with the employment situation of both parents. Type of family (e.g. single or dual earners) and gender of the child had no effect on this percentage.

Table 1 about here

Question 2. Degree of satisfaction with the (employment) situation of the parents

Measurements with the four-point scale revealed that 64.2% of the children were much to very much satisfied with their mothers' (employment) situation, 24.5% a little satisfied and 11.3% not at all satisfied. With the fathers' employment situation 58.7% proved to be much to very much satisfied, 27.5% slightly satisfied and 11.8 % not at all satisfied. The average degree of satisfaction with the mothers' situation is significantly higher than that with the fathers' (employment) situation ($M = 2.92$ and 2.83, $t(545) = 2.14$; $p < .05$, paired t-test). Analyses of variance further show that the degree of satisfaction with the situation of the mother in families where only the father is gainfully employed, is markedly higher than in families where both partners are in gainful employment ($F(1, 483) = 11.09$; $p < .0009$). The degree of satisfaction with the (employment) situation of the father does not differ substantially in the two types of families. Solely in families with only the father in gainful employment, the satisfaction with the situation of the mother appeared to be considerably higher than that with the situation of the father ($t(80) = 3.13$, $p = .002$).

Gender of the child had no effect on the degree of satisfaction with the employement situation of the mother ($F(1,545) = .06$, $p = .81$) and of the father ($F(1,545) = .20$; $p = .65$)

Table 2 about here

Question 3. Parents' assessment of the degree to which the children are satisfied with their parents' (employment) situation.

In families with both parents in gainful employment the mothers underestimate the percentage of the children who are very much satisfied with their mothers' (employment) situation by 8% and the percentage of those who are dissatisfied by 5.6%; the fathers from these families underrate the

number of very much satisfied with their fathers' (employment) situation by 12.7% and the number of dissatisfied by 8.5%. In families where only the father is gainfully employed the mothers overestimate the number of children which are very much satisfied with their mothers' situation by 2.4% and underestimate the percentage of dissatisfied by 5%; the fathers in these families estimate the percentage of very much satisfied rightly and underestimate the number of dissatisfied by 10.5%.

Question 4. Prevailing reasons for satisfaction with the parents' (employment) situation

The answers to the questions "Why are you satisfied with your mummy's/daddy's (employment) situation?" and "What would you prefer?" were coded. The table below shows the prevailing answers with their percentages relating to the father and the mother in the two types of families.

Table 3 about here

Discussion and conclusion

We noticed that approx. 4/5 of the children were satisfied with their mothers' (employment) situation, 3/4 with their fathers' employment situation and 6/10 with the employment situation of both parents. The degree of satisfaction generally proved high: about 90% were at least a little satisfied. Gender of the child had no influence on the percentage or degree of satisfaction with the (employment) situation of either father of mother.

In two-earner households there is no more any difference in the percentage of children satisfied or in the degree of satisfaction with fathers' and mothers' employment situation. In families where only the father is gainfully employed the percentage of children satisfied and the degree of satisfaction with mothers' (employment) situation is higher. In families where only the father is gainfully employed the degree of satisfaction with mothers' (employment) situation is higher than in families where both parents are in gainful employment. However, the degree of satisfaction with fathers' situation is equal in both types of families.

It was found that all fathers and mothers underestimated the number of dissatisfied children by 5 to 10% and that only the mothers, who were not gainfully employed, overestimated the number of very satisfied children.

The prevailing reasons for satisfaction in regard to children of parents in gainful employment are that the parents earn money, that they are sufficiently at their disposal and that they enjoy their occupation. The children whose mothers are not gainfully employed are especially satisfied with this because their mothers are then very often at home - so that they are not alone - and look after them well. Children whose parents are gainfully employed would especially like to see their parents more at home, remaining at home and having more time.

On the basis of the latter answers additional analyses of variance were performed which revealed that both, type of family and feeling that the mother has enough time for the child have a significant main effect on the degree of satisfaction with mothers' (employment) situation ($F(3,537) = 8.092$; $p = .00$). For the degree of satisfaction with the employement situation of the father, there was a main effect of feeling that father has enough time and of feeling that mother has enough time ($F(3, 537) = 5.5$; $p = .00$).

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Author Note

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Table 1.

Percentage of children who were satisfied with their parents' (employment) situation and percentage who would like to see it changed.

(employment) situation being:	Total sample		Both parents gainfully employed		Only the father gainfully employed	
	Mummy	Daddy	Mummy	Daddy	Mummy	Daddy
good	83	76	81	77	87	75
preferably changed	20	27	21	26	15	30

Table 2.

Degree of satisfaction with the (employment) situation of the parents

	Total sample		Both parents gainfully employed		Only the father gainfully employed	
	Mummy	Daddy	Mummy	Daddy	Mummy	Daddy
Mean	2.92	2.83	2.81	2.79	3.09	2.79
s.d.	.98	.95	.97	.93	1.02	1.02

Table 3

Prevailing reasons for satisfaction with the parents' (employment) situation

	Two parents in gainful employment		Only the father gainfully employed	
The situation satisfies because:	Mummy	Daddy	Mummy	Daddy
Earns much money	30.2	37.2		45.8
The parent is sufficiently at my disposal	26.4	19.8	5.6	8.5
Stating "occupation"	11.0	8.4	2.8	8.5
Parent enjoys it	6.5	9.2	0.0	6.8
Parent is very often at home	7.9	4.6	20.8	0.0
Fine job, good job	4.5	5.7	1.4	5.1
Then I am never alone at home	1.0	.40	16.7	0.0
Looks after me very well	3.4	1.9	11.1	1.7
Has time to help me	3.1	1.1	12.5	1.7
Change is preferred, namely:				
Should be more at home	39.2	58.2	0.0	41.7
Should remain at home	12.2	17.6	20	16.7
More time for me	10.8	7.7	0.0	0.0
Should be less busy	5.4	1.1	0.0	12.5
Should find a job or another job	0.0	1.1	20	8.3
Should earn more money	10.8	7.7	0.0	8.3